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**To the Editor**

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## **Rein in legislative spending**

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This has been a dreadful year for the state of Rhode Island, one of the very few states to be running a deficit. We have just passed a budget that has level funded education, increased many fees and used one-time tobacco settlement money to plug the hole in our operating budget. But, as is our custom, we have done nothing to curb legislative spending. In addition, we are increasing the judiciary budget, including allocating funds to build a new courthouse in the Blackstone Valley. Where are our priorities?

The Rhode Island General Assembly is one of the most generous of all state legislatures when it comes to its own budget. Data from the National Council of State Legislators shows that in 2005, Rhode Island was rated second in per capita spending on legislative branch spending, just over \$23 per person in the state, where the neighboring state of Massachusetts, with a full time legislature, spends just over \$8. And, states with similar populations spent much less, Delaware with \$12 and New Hampshire with less than \$9. To make matters worse, since that time, we have increased our budget from \$25 million to the budget for next year of \$36 million, over a 30 percent increase in just over three years! In this time of dire fiscal straits for our state, I feel this is irresponsible to say the least.

The financial problems that Rhode Island has been, and is currently facing, are in large part caused by the enormous tax burden that is placed on the shoulders of all who work, live or operate a business here. This makes our state less appealing to homeowners, workers and business owners. One reason our taxes are so high is because our part-time legislature costs the taxpayers three times as much as the full-time Massachusetts legislature costs their taxpayers. If we want to make our state more competitive with Massachusetts, which would help us bring in more tax dollars without having to raise taxes, then we need to get each department and each branch of government to control its spending. Considering the enormous growth in legislative spending in recent years, I would suggest that the legislature would be a good place to start.

During the budget debate, I submitted an amendment to take just \$3 million from the legislative budget and use the money to pay the school districts for extraordinary expenses for special education. That cut would have been paid for by agreeing to have legislators co-share for the medical expenses and also do away with many of the legislative grants that are given out each year with no oversight or accountability from the receiving groups. It would have been a small start to a very big problem, but it would have at least been a start. It was defeated by a vote of 17 "yeas" to 51 "nays."

And now, there is going to be a new commission to study an expansion of the Statehouse? What is our thinking here? Rather than a commission to study the expansion of the Statehouse, I will be submitting legislation in the new session to study how we can reign in legislative spending. That will be coupled with a bill to ask for a yearly audit, conducted by an independent agency, to be made public in a timely manner prior to next year's general election.

We need to get serious about solving the perennial economic problems of this state, not just wring our hands about it. And, the General Assembly should be leading the charge of this reform effort, not part of the problem as it has been. Rhode Islanders should demand nothing less from their elected leaders.

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